

Teaching gender through writing "experience stories"

Published in Women's International Forum 1998; 21 (2)

Karin Widerberg, University of Oslo
Karin.widerberg@sosiologi.uio.no



**Department of Sociology and Human Geography
University of Oslo**

P.O.Box 1096 Blindern

N-0317 OSLO Norway

Telephone: + 47 22855257

Fax: + 47 22855253

Internet: <http://www.iss.uio.no>

Teaching gender through writing "experience stories"

Karin Widerberg

Abstract

Teaching gender perspectives to a student generation breastfed on equality and regarding itself as having surpassed the need for "all that" necessitates new approaches. A technique labelled "experience stories" has been developed to deal with these problems in both research and teaching. This technique, inspired by the memory-work method, is illustrated in this article through a description of its application on one particular occasion. 100 undergraduate students were presented with a written request to *"Describe (concretely!) a situation occurring today, yesterday or in the recent past when you felt/experienced/were made aware of being a woman/man"*. It is argued here how texts of this kind, based on the students' experiences and understandings of gender, can be utilized as a point of departure in teaching gender perspectives. It is further argued that this will in turn guarantee involvement on the part of the students, thus promoting reflection and critique of the understandings of gender in the disciplines.

Introduction

Approaching the year 2000, the reasons for which we feminists must still step in and give a couple of lectures on gender perspectives in our disciplines are the same as always, and I'm afraid quite familiar to most of us. In my own discipline, sociology, gender might be mentioned by the lecturers but is then treated as a variable or at the most as a separate "issue"; something about women or "women issues". Gender is definitely far from being understood and applied as a perspective when teaching the discipline. That is, as a fundamental social organizational principle, affecting all aspects of social life. Besides, the non-feminist male or female teachers succeed - by not being up-to-date, interested or involved in gender and feminist research - in turning it into a remnant from by-gone days. They thus succeed in confirming the views of the younger generations in Scandinavia today; gender issues are traditional equality issues and as such are of no interest to a generation which "has all that" (that's what they think !), and which has moved beyond, to individual and subject positions and discourses. So, if we want to further gender perspectives in these generations, reaching them and engaging them in a reflexive dialogue about gender seems a highly urgent and political task. If not, feminist and gender research and politics might die with us.

But how can they be reached ? Teaching sociology students at all levels over a number of years has taught me that if a theme is theoretically advanced and stated in sufficiently sophisticated terms, (that is, if it is difficult) - preferably handled meta-theoretically - the students will be thrilled. In this package even gender issues can be swallowed and the male students here are often those who show the most interest. They just love post-structuralist discourses ! I do understand and can share their intellectual thrill for texts that open up totally new ways of understanding even though one might have to struggle with the texts to reach this understanding. The problem, as I see it, is just that these understandings are rarely related- implicitly or explicitly - to the lives and gender of the students themselves. As a result, gender is primarily considered as an intellectual issue and not also a personal and political one. The fault is of course not theirs, but embedded in the discipline as such - something Dorothy E. Smith has highlighted in her work (Smith 1987, 1989, 1990a, 1990b) - and the way it is researched and taught. The students learn about society from a ruler's perspective. Class and gender is accordingly something others "have". If asked about their own class and gender experiences, the first reaction is usually total blankness. Then they start searching for sociological concepts that fit and if none can be found, they condemn their own experiences as not "Sociology". But if they can't read their own gender experiences into the concepts handed to them, these will of course not be the tools that they can use to understand their lives and their

societies. And since Sociology's gender, which is formulated in abstract terms as the gender, is not their gender, their gender is made invisible and conceived of as "not gender". Not only to them but also to us.

Knowing all this means that it is of little use to just step in and "straighten things out", that is, telling them how wrong they are about gender and what gender is all about. Of course, they might learn about my understandings of gender but they won't learn about their own understandings of gender and neither will I. To get them all to reflect and articulate understandings of gender, for us all to share, I have developed a technique which I've labeled "experience stories". It started out as a research method and technique - briefly discussed in a later section of this article - but as I here hope to show, it can also be used for teaching purposes, to great thrill for both teacher and students.

I want to illustrate the method through a description of its use at a particular occasion. The way in which the stories were analyzed and what they could tell us about the students - what we could learn from them - as well as the students' reactions, will be highlighted. Since I have used the method extensively, not only in different settings and on varied themes but also in varied forms, and it is all these experiences that have convinced me of the fruitfulness of the method for teaching purposes, I'll also discuss the "original method" and the varieties I've developed and used. In this way, I hope to inspire others to explore its potentialities in

both teaching and research, in different situations and for different purposes.

"Describe (concretely !) a situation - today, yesterday or in the near past - when you felt/experienced/was made aware of being a woman/man"

It's 28 February 1996. I'm scheduled for two lectures for secondterm undergraduates in sociology on "Gender Perspectives in/on Sociology". I introduce myself and tell them - around one hundred students - that before I start my lecture, I would like them to write a couple of lines on the titled theme. I tell them to write no name on the paper, but just to indicate their sex. I also tell them that I will have read all the stories by the next lecture when I'll discuss with them my analyses of their material. Papers are then handed out and the students are given 10 minutes for the task. After some initial laughter and bodily restlessness, they all settle down to write. When time is up, I ask them to give in the texts, and the way they hand them over shows that they have enjoyed the task and are looking forward to learning more about what this is all about. They'll have to wait until next time, I tell them, and then proceed with my lecture.

Ninety-one (91) stories are handed in, 60 by women and 31 by men. Two-thirds of our undergraduates students are women so the proportion of female and male texts corresponds to the actual gender situation in the discipline.

I read through all the female texts first and note the type of situation they wrote about. I get more than 30 different situations, such as;

wasn't heard/seen, dressing, in relation to a man, talking about equality/gender, flirting, cleaning up, "girls'talk, menstruation, chivalry, prejudice, doing gymnastics, in town at night (frightened), the Ladies-line, work-tasks, I'm cooking, he's cooking, having the dishwasher installed, being talked to as a good girl, being silenced in the study-group, dancing, male tv-games, not coping with the machines (computer, copy-machine, and so forth), being more interested in the discipline(than men), men being unclean/unhygienic/not smartly dressed, getting a women's job, work division on a week-end in the country, feeling pregnant, ladies cloak-room, showing emotions...

Only two texts expressed no reflections on gender. The men's texts were just as varied. The situations they wrote about were;

Opening doors/paying for her beer, shaving, argument about washing up, reading about or discussing gender, complaints from the girlfriend, taking a pee, when women expects one to act/perform/know typical male things(replacing light bulbs, fixing the car, washing machine etc), being object of a woman's desire, men's talk/boys talk, dirty talk, dildoes, using the ladies room, , didn't do housework, heard women talking about menstruation and birth-control, flirting, watching male sex -offenders on film (embarrassing for the male gender), watching

men's films, talking with the son about the tough sex, women dominating in the study-group...

Like the women, only two texts reported no reflections on gender. The men's texts, however, were shorter and it was unclear, in a couple of them, whether they meant to be joking or not. Taking a pee, for example; is that an effort to make fun of the task or is it a real answer ? Some of the men's texts also expressed a sense of being provoked by women and equality themes. Similar expressions could not be found in the women's texts. Comparing the texts between the men and the women, it is however the similarities that maybe are the most striking. They both reflect on gender when;

- doing traditional gender tasks
- "doing", that is, dealing with their bodies (as sex or gender)
- being together with their own sex
- flirting
- discussing gender or equality
- perceiving the other gender as dominating

Some men report reflecting on gender when listening to women talk about "women stuff", while we don't find corresponding stories by the women. The women on the other hand, write about being talked to or treated as an object by the men but also by each other. Such experiences are absent in the men's stories. Another interesting

difference is that women reflect on gender when men do traditional female task, whereas men do not think about gender when women do traditional male tasks.

Focusing on type of relations more than tasks, both men and women express reflecting on gender in;

- relation to/being with their own sex
- relation to/being with the other sex
- being with the other sex when gender/equality is the theme

The men report experiencing gender when acting. They don't report being treated as gender-objects in the same way as the women express in their stories. Both parties are embarrassed by their own gender and they both express a bad conscience regarding issues of equality. They don't do or feel what they "should" feel. They don't live up to the "equality standards" of either themselves or their sex. And they don't express any enjoyment or pride of their gender.

Is that what gender is all about to you ? - I asked the students after presenting these results. Is gender only about equality issues ? And do you accept the official equality discourse and value your own behaviour and feelings in its light, to the extent and in the way you express it in these stories ? Aren't you ever happy or content that you are a man or a woman and hasn't that got anything to do with equality ? Or are you just writing here what you think is

expected of you as a student in sociology ? That is, are you writing about gender in the way you've learned about gender through sociology ? What else could gender be about ?

The questions were consciously formulated in a provocative way. I had myself been provoked by the negative and self-critical tone in the stories. Gender conceived as equality was obviously no fun at all, it only made them feel bad or wrong. But was this really true ? The students listened in dead silence.

Class was over, the students crowded in the corridors, engaged in lively debates. Gender - their gender - and Sociology - their sociology - was the theme. It would have been a great starting-point for further explorations of our, their, and my understandings of gender and sociology. With more and other stories on specific and selected themes, this could have been interpreted by the students themselves, in groups. But my time was up. I had given them some tools, they had given me and themselves materials and themes to reflect upon.

From memory-work to experience stories

The method is greatly inspired by and springs from the "memory-work method", developed by the German sociologist Frigga Haug and her colleagues (Haug 1987).

Memory-work as developed by Frigga Haug, had a two-fold purpose. First, to establish a qualitative method based on non-positivistic relations of production of knowledge, in the sense that all participants were at the same time both researchers and subjects and that they all participated in the interpretation processes (which was to be done collectively). Secondly, to develop an approach intended to problematize the natural, the things we take for granted in every-day life. The reason for the later point - for Frigga Haug as a feminist - was that the oppression of women, the reign of patriarchy, and our participation in it will continue as long as we take it for granted. We accordingly have to develop approaches that enable us to see gender and oppression in a new "fresh" way.

Memory-work was originally designed as a collective method. Every participant was to write a memory - the theme being decided collectively - and take part in the interpretation on equal terms. Different techniques have been developed to make the writing and the interpretation as rich and fruitful as possible. When I have used the method myself, I have for example asked the participants to write and interpret the memories anonymously, so that no

one could claim "ownership to the story" (the "correct" interpretation). When the analyses are completed, the participants can of course, if they so wish, tell each other which one of the stories was theirs. We have also written the stories in three versions - in the form of the first person and in the form of male and female third person. The purpose is to see what happens when you objectify yourself (sometimes it is easier to write a story in the third-person) or establish a distance to yourself. By using the male and female form, the gender of the text is made visible, often in ways that weren't visible when the "gender was correct".

In writing about a memory on a certain topic/experience, one should try to be as concrete as possible, by giving all the details of the situation. One should also try to use the words one would have used when this situation occurred. This might mean that the voice sounds stupid, mean or whatever, in the ears of the writer of today. Of course writing a memory always involves interpretation. Interpretation is what forces the memory forward, affecting both how and what we remember. And every memory has layers of interpretation, especially if the memory is of something that happened long ago. But even so, one should try not to analyze these memories while writing them, but rather give the story a chance to be told as straightforwardly as possible. Categories, hasty analyses, intellectualizing, is more of a problem than a resource here

since it closes more than it opens for interpretation at that stage.

The very act of writing, instead of articulating orally - even though one knows it is to be read or heard by someone else, opens the possibility of reflections of a different depth on the subject. First, due to the time factor - it takes longer to write than to talk. Also, writing necessitates more of a searching for words that fit. The words themselves become more important since we can't talk around them as we do orally. In other words, writing generally means more reflections on the meaning of the words, a reflection of the intermingling of the symbolic and materialist dimensions. That is, more interpretation of one's experience but also more in one's own terms. It is not a dialogue in the same way as an interview may be. Even though one might write for a reader, this writing is done without the interference of the reader's reactions or interpretations during the act of writing. As another form for articulation of experience, this method should therefore be explored to reveal all its potentials and possibilities.

Another aspect of this method that makes it so fruitful for grasping experiences, is that the topic for the writing is always a specific situation or an event on a theme. Writing about anger for example, means writing about a specific situation in which I was angry. Thus it is the situation rather than myself that is focused upon. There are other situations where I feel and act anger differently. Given all

these potential stories together - the self might appear as fragmented. This is very important. It is a method whose purpose is not to construct the self, compared to biographies where this is always the underlying project. It is a method where the self is not the focus, but rather the situation - the relations in the situation - that make up the experience. This means interpreting the relations forming the experience, rather than looking for the causes "in" the individual. That is, memories are written and interpreted in order to see the social relations on all levels which form the experience in question.

What I've described so far is mainly how memories can be written and analyzed in a collective setting. The size of the group, how well the participants know each other and the time one has at one's disposal, set the limits for both the themes that can be chosen and the depth of the analyses. On the theme "female sexualization", Frigga Haug and her colleagues worked in a group with this method for several years (Haug 1987). The same is true for another group of feminist researchers, exploring gender and emotions (Crawford et al 1992). For several years I did my own memory-work on sexuality and knowledge, to see if I could trace the patterns that paves the way to feminist research and feminist perspectives on production of knowledge (Widerberg 1995). But besides that work and an on-going interdisciplinary research project on the body where we use this methodⁱ. I have myself mainly used it in collective settings where the group has been of a more temporary

type. Giving three-day courses in the memory-work method for example, I have worked with students of both sexes on themes such as anger, blushing/sweating, to "master" something, vacuum-cleaning, dancing, getting dressed, travelling to work, and so forth. We used mostly just one theme per course and the themes were deliberately "dull", chosen to problematize gender in everyday life. In these courses everything is done collectively in the group, even the memories are written there and then. De-dramatizing writing by doing it together, in a limited time and anonymously, makes it less pretentious and frightening. Then everyone can write something.

The students' positive reactions made me develop it also as a technique to use in other settings and where the purpose was not to learn the method as such, but where a particular theme was at focus. In a half-day workshop on "fatherhood" at a Nordic research conference, I asked the participants to write a short memory story on "My friend's father". And even though they were asked to write in English - a foreign language to the vast majority of the participants -, the stories were surprisingly rich in content, meanings and variations. Having no time for copying all the stories for all of the participants, I read them out loud instead. Each story was read twice and slowly, one after the other without any comments. The participants were asked to write down their reflections when listening and afterwards we had a general discussion about the patterns, relations, situations and emotions we found revealed in the stories.

The same pattern was used in another half-day workshop at a conference on drug treatment in a gender perspective. Here they were asked to write a memory story about "a drunk person". When reading these stories aloud, I also changed the gender in the story to open them up for reflections on gender. No one complained about the writing in either workshop. They were all able to write a story and they all had something to write about. That the theme is formulated in concrete and not in abstract terms is of course of vital importance. Writing about "fatherhood" instead of "my friend's father", is much more difficult and would probably also result in more abstract and accordingly less new and interesting material.

Convinced that people's own experiences is the place to start when themes are to be problematized, I've come to use the technique also in more ordinary teaching situations. When I give post-graduate courses on gender I use it in a similar way as in the workshops described above. But when I teach the undergraduates - the group I took as a startingpoint in this article - in classes with 1-300 students, it has to be done a bit differently. My hope is that the account here given of such an event can inspire also others to explore the potentialities of the method of writing "experience stories".

References

Haug, Frigga. (1987). *Female Sexualization*. London: Verso

Crawford, June et al. (1992). *Emotion and Gender*. London: Sage.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1987). *The Everyday World as Problematic - A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1989). "Sociological Theory - Methods of Writing Patriarchy", article in Wallace, Ruth (ed.). (1989). *Feminism and Sociological Theory*. New York: Sage

Smith, Dorothy E. (1990a). *Texts Facts and Femininity - Exploring the Relations of Ruling*. London: Routledge.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1990b). *The Conceptual Practices of Power - a Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Widerberg, Karin. (1995). "Kunskapens kön" (The Gender of Knowledge) Stockholm : Norstedts

Biographical Statement

Karin Widerberg, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at the Dept. of Sociology, University of Oslo, Norway. She has published books and articles on feminist theory of science and methodology, understandings of gender, sexual violence, and law from a feminist perspective.

University of Oslo, Department of Sociology, P.O.Box
1096 Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway. Phone
(47)22855247, Fax (47)22855253, e-mail
Karin.Widerberg@sosiologi.uio.no

ⁱ In this research group, where we come from such different disciplines as psychology, sociology and literature, we make body-practices that are also written down as texts for discussion and analyzed in the group. The themes have varied but usually one specific day has been selected when we all perform the practice we've decided upon. We have for example had a day of practicing "low-energy", that is, we've tried to use as little energy as possible when performing our daily work-tasks. We have also written "body-biographies", where we have tried to focus on what body (and body-parts) we have lived in, perceived and acted from. All these texts have been analyzed in the group where we have made explicit use of the perspectives of our disciplines to further new understandings of the body as well as the disciplines in its perspective. We hope to present this work in a book in 1998 or 1999.